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Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its fortieth session (see E/2009/24), the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Commission the report of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics which is presented to the Commission for information. The report covers issues related to the revision of the mandate of the group, a summary of progress made and plans for 2010 and 2011. The Commission is requested to take note of the report.

* E/CN.3/2010/1.

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Report of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics

I. Background

1. The Statistical Commission at its thirty-fourth session in 2003, agreed that the United Nations Statistics Division should set up an Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics, to enhance coordination of international work in the field by helping to establish cooperative working relations in the areas where harmonization, avoidance of unnecessary duplication and the pooling of resources can provide more and faster progress.

2. The Working Group was established in December 2003, with the participation of the United Nations Statistics Division, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat), the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) joined the Working Group in 2005.

3. The main objective of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics has been to firmly anchor environment statistics as part of official statistics by improving and strengthening basic environmental data, and thus to make an important contribution to the development of environmental indicators, indicators of sustainable development and integrated environmental and economic accounting. The objectives, terms of reference and organization of work of the Working Group were adopted by the Statistical Commission at its thirty-fifth session in 2004.

II. Revision of the mandate of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics

4. The United Nations Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting (UNCEEA) was established by the United Nations Statistical Commission at its thirty-sixth session in March 2005. Its overall objectives were to (a) mainstream environmental-economic accounting and related statistics; (b) elevate the *System of integrated Environmental and Economic Accounting (SEEA)* to an international statistical standard; and (c) advance the implementation of SEEA in countries.

5. The Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting at its third meeting in 2008, discussed the extension of its mandate to environment statistics, including statistics related to climate change, and submitted a revised mandate to the fortieth session of the Statistical Commission in February 2009. The Working Group was requested by the Committee to review its mandate with respect to the planned expansion of the Committee mandate.

6. The Statistical Commission did not adopt the expanded mandate of the Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting at its fortieth session. The Committee was requested to review again its mandate to reflect the focus on its priority task, namely the standardization and implementation of SEEA, and to clarify its proposed role in environment and climate change-related statistics.

7. In this context, and awaiting a final decision about the expansion of the mandate of the Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting, the Working Group decided to postpone the discussion of its own mandate. The Working Group, however, is willing to examine its mandate by further clarifying its objectives and terms of reference, and by re-focusing its work programme on core activities that contribute to the improvement of the availability and quality of basic environment statistics without duplicating efforts.

III. Progress of work of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics in 2008 and 2009

8. At its thirty-ninth session, in February 2008, the Statistical Commission took note of the report of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics,[1] including its work programme. The 2008-2009 work programme included the following activities: (a) harmonization of water statistics; (b) developing a joint glossary of environment statistics; (c) developing harmonized metadata guidelines for environment statistics; (d) harmonization of land use and land cover statistics; (e) coordinating the implementation of the 2008 data collection and dissemination programme; (f) further developing the Working Group website; and (g) joint training and capacity-building activities.

9. Methodological and harmonization work in water statistics contributed to the development of the draft International Recommendations for Water Statistics and its accompanying data compilation guidelines. The International Recommendations for Water Statistics will be submitted to the Statistical Commission for adoption in 2010. Work on the data compilation guidelines and training material for water statistics is ongoing.

10. Work on the joint *Glossary of Environment Statistics* continued, but has not been concluded yet owing to the revision of the international questionnaires and will go on in 2010 and 2011.

11. UNEP and Eurostat developed a list of core metadata elements for water statistics while making use of existing standards including Statistical Data and Metadata Exchange (SDMX) and International Organization for Standardization (ISO). The list will be used in upcoming data collections and in the draft International Recommendations for Water Statistics.

12. The 2008 data collection round was implemented in a timely manner and well coordinated between the agencies involved. An extra effort was made to synchronize the data collection between the United Nations Statistics Division, Eurostat and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia with respect to the countries that participated in the data collection carried out within the frame of the MEDSTAT project. The integrated results of the data collection have been published on the website of the United Nations Statistics Division (http://unstats.un.org/unsd/environment/qindicators.htm) based on the data from the United Nations Statistics Division/UNEP Questionnaire, complemented by data from FAO; the data for the same indicators for the European Union and OECD member and partner countries are from OECD

[1] See E/CN.3/2008/24.

and Eurostat, while statistics on other environmental themes have been compiled from other international organizations.

13. The Joint Meeting on Environmental Indicators for the countries of the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia and South-Eastern Europe regions was held in Geneva in August 2009. The meeting was organized by the United Nations Statistics Division and ECE and was supported by Eurostat and FAO. The main objectives of the joint meeting were to: (a) discuss priorities and modalities of cooperation on methodological issues of environmental indicators between statisticians and environmental experts; (b) review in detail selected indicators covered by the ECE guidelines for the application of environmental indicators in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, and provide practical recommendations on the use of statistical classifications, data collection methods and procedures for the production of indicators; and (c) exchange information on international developments related to environmental indicators. A second joint meeting is planned for April 2010.

14. The Working Group website, hosted by the United Nations Statistics Division, is undergoing significant development and will contain pertinent information with regard to the activities of the Working Group, such as the data collection calendar and the integrated presentation of activities in environment statistics (http://unstats.un.org/unsd/environment/coordination.htm).

IV. Work programme of the Intersecretariat Working Group on Environment Statistics in 2010 and 2011

15. No major revisions would be made to the OECD/Eurostat and United Nations Statistics Division/UNEP Questionnaires for the 2010 data collection round. Eurostat and OECD have had a number of discussions in preparation of the 2010 data collection. To support the implementation of the new International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC Rev.4/NACE Rev.2), it will be used in the sections of the OECD/Eurostat Questionnaire requesting data broken down by economic activity (environmental protection expenditures and revenues, inland waters, waste) and the related tables will be adjusted as appropriate. The Statistics Division already used the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC Rev.4) in the 2008 data collection. The coordination of geographical coverage will be discussed in detail to avoid duplication, as some countries participate in multiple international and regional activities.

16. The review of the joint OECD-Eurostat and United Nations Statistics Division/UNEP Questionnaires will continue over 2010 and 2011. It encompasses a review of data needs for policy analysis and indicator development, an inventory of international data sources and a survey of national data sources. The data collection frequency will be reviewed on a theme by theme basis. An annual quality assurance will be put in place by OECD for environmental reference series. A restructured and updated questionnaire will be available in 2012. The respective organizations will share and, where appropriate, coordinate their experiences on the basis of previous data collection rounds and new developments to plan for any revisions for future data collection rounds

17. Results from the inventory of international data sources carried out as part of the review of the questionnaire on the state of the environment will be further developed and a summary will be posted on the Working Group website.

18. The Working Group will contribute to the work led by the United Nations Statistics Division on the development of a core set of environment statistics to provide guidance to countries with very limited resources and at early stages of environment statistics. The core set will be developed in close consultation with countries and will include a limited number of statistical variables accompanied by appropriate methodological description and guidance for their compilation. It will take into account international data collections and major indicator initiatives and will consider the most pertinent data needs created by global environmental conventions and multilateral environmental agreements. The members of the Working Group will contribute to the development of the core set of environment statistics and review drafts and will discuss them at meetings.

19. The need for improved metadata has been expressed at a number of forums, and collecting and publishing this information needs to be carefully considered and planned, including the technical side of this issue. Further to the proposals by UNEP and Eurostat on core metadata elements for environment statistics, more work needs to be done on metadata in the context of the review of international questionnaires and in the light of the SDMX framework that contains detailed lists of metadata items.

20. The revision of the *Glossary of Environment Statistics* will continue in 2010 and 2011 to take into account (a) the results of ongoing reviews of international questionnaires and of related terms and definitions; and (b) recent and ongoing work concerning the development of international recommendations and classifications in the field of environment statistics.

21. Recent developments in the field of land use/cover statistics and related monitoring tools and classifications will be reviewed, under the lead of FAO. The purpose is to improve the classifications, harmonization and quality of international data on land use and land cover, to better coordinate relevant international activities and to ensure these statistics are more useful for environmental and other purposes. Derived from the experience of worldwide use of the Land Cover Classification System, FAO has submitted a Land Cover Meta Language to become an ISO standard.

22. The second Joint Meeting on Environmental Indicators for the countries of the Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia and South-Eastern Europe regions will be held in Geneva in April 2010. The Working Group will explore the possibilities for collaboration to jointly organize other training workshops during 2010 and 2011 on the basis of their shared work programmes.